

Determining the value of your Library Science degree

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Abstract:

Purpose

– The purpose of this paper is to present a discussion of some of the issues related to the perceived value of Library and Information Science (LIS) degrees.

Design/methodology/approach

– This is a viewpoint supported with research from current field literature.

Findings

– This is recognizing some of the problems encountered with perceived value of LIS degrees and comparing other disciplines. Recommendations are made for individuals to lead their own career needs.

Originality/value

– This is the author's own points of view.

Keywords: Value | Profession | Degree | LIS

Article:

Libraries across the country are continuing to suffer from poor financial support from their home institutions or governments. Librarians can be caught in a variety of job-related situations, such as layoffs, lack of salary increases or promotional opportunities or stalemated positions that cannot offer growth or refreshment. Many of the financial problems, institutionally speaking, can manifest itself into other problems for individuals in making choices about employment and career growth.

This can present a challenge to many librarians with traditional library degrees, IMLS or MLS and little other experience. This is also problematic with the changing nature of libraries evolving around mobile technologies, electronic resources and increasing new demands from

users. This has led to library positions becoming more specialized and, in many cases, requiring additional skills or knowledge to meet the needs of the organization.

Jacquelyn Smith's article in Forbes magazine in June 2012 (Smith, 2012), which depicted obtaining a Master's degree in Library Science as one of the worst graduate degrees to earn, created a storm of discussion and lamenting over the value of an LIS degree. Her criteria was based on financial data related to real-time salary information and employment projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics which framed her point of view purely from an economic stance of income potential. She allowed in her article that other reasons exist to obtain certain graduate degrees, such as an MLS, but "earning a living" and pursuing career stability is usually a top motivator for most graduate degrees.

The economic value of any advanced degree is in the application of the knowledge gained to a common useful purpose in terms of employment or compensation. This means that the holder of that degree must also bring into consideration other factors, such as work experience, other education or certifications and the ability to utilize core skills from a particular curriculum effectively across multiple disciplines. Skills learned in Library Science programs can transcend traditional library employment opportunities and satisfy needs in other areas. The ability to navigate and manage information utilizes skills that can be useful in a variety of non-librarian roles, such as researcher, project management, data analysis or documentation specialist (Szkolar, 2012).

Developing specialties

The complexity of society has enhanced the use of information and data to be much more detailed and specific. Users now approach librarians with their information needs already partially met through Google or other self-searching activities. Librarians must now dig deeper and explore options that are uncommon or unavailable to the general public. In many cases, specialized skills and knowledge are needed not only to identify and access the information required, but also to have the credibility with partners, such as faculty or subject matter experts, to collaborate effectively on shared research or projects.

Changes to librarianship based on economics, technology and user expectations manifests itself in organizational staffing, with the need to redeploy or repurpose staff functions and reconsider what primary job responsibilities are best suited for librarians in particular. LIS programs continue to produce new graduates infusing the profession with new talent (Janes, 2015), but are the specialized needs being met with degrees wrapped around a core standard, as agreed to and expected from the American Library Association (ALA)?

Individuals who seek and achieve degrees in Library Science or Information studies do so for various reasons. Those degrees coupled with other experiences and/or education can produce a personal career plan that can include both salary considerations and job satisfaction from doing work that is meaningful and rewarding. This strategic planning for career development is the ultimate responsibility of the LIS student, to match or complement their other experiences and education with their LIS program. But schools producing graduates from LIS programs also have the responsibility to keep up with relevant curriculum to help support an LIS degree that is relevant for the times.

Other profession

This is not an issue that is strictly impacting the LIS field; all things change, so other professions with advanced degrees also must constantly review the criteria by which their educational programs are based. Other professions also develop guidelines and collect data to assess and promote the value of their graduate degrees. A good example is the Master's degree of Business Administration (MBA).

Once again, data and statistics about salary and employability are the key indicators to the bottom line interpretation of the value of an MBA. According to the Association of MBA's (www.ambaguide.com), salaries and employed holders of an MBA are on the rise. They also consider the broad reach of an MBA in terms of its utility by discipline and cite strong representation of MBA degrees across multiple market sectors, such as health care, consulting, energy and public services.

A review of the perceived value of an MBA, especially in hard economic times, found that graduates of MBA programs had no regrets in making their investment for grad school instead of building work experience in other ways (Schoenfeld, 2014). The factors surveyed from recent alumni included financial, personal and professional attributes, related to obtaining the degree. The same survey also spoke to the long-term value of the degree which also produced a positive result.

Another professional field that has undergone tremendous change is journalism; with the decline of the traditional newspaper, a disparity has been created between educators and practitioners within the field, labeled a digital divide (Flaherty, 2013). A study by the Poynter Institute (www.poynter.org), which provides professional support to the journalism industry, pointed to education in the form of graduate degrees as being important to teaching the value of journalism as a profession. But the study found that new graduates were not fully prepared to enter the workforce at the level expected.

If any of this sounds familiar, then it is because this same disparity is debated with our profession as LIS programs seek to keep curriculum updated and relevant, while organizations like the ALA keep a plethora of professional development coursework available for career enhancement opportunities. Graduates of MBA programs also have a commonality with graduates of LIS programs in that those skills and knowledge values should be recognized across multiple market sectors for more diverse employment opportunities.

What is missing?

The literature has some good viewpoints on how LIS programs can be altered to produce better perceived value. Many programs are already making changes, some even removing the work "library" from their program titles. The value of any degree relates to the standard from which it is derived, so much attention falls to ALA Standards for Accreditation and whether or not this foundation is solid enough to support teaching the competencies needed in such a dynamic profession.

Part of addressing this problem requires gathering more information from LIS program graduates. Learning more about alumni output and how their degrees impacted their career path could inform LIS programs and ALA standards going forward (O'Connor and Mulvaney, 2014). In looking at other professions, including the two mentioned, business and journalism, stronger attempts to obtain useful data from program graduates have resulted in improvements to core educational standards that improve the value and credibility of their degree programs.

Professionals in the field, at all types of libraries, can also have an impact on the long-term perspective of what LIS degree holders can accomplish. Once again, more data related to other factors needed for success, continued employment or career advancement should be gathered from practicing librarians. And consideration for experience is also important for hiring managers who need individuals who can take positions that expect immediate results. The old fashion apprenticeship gave real world expectations for specific functions to be performed and could be judged a better teacher than programs laced with theory (Kelley, 2013). LIS programs put this in the perspective of practicums and internships, but are they realistic in their purpose or accomplish the intention with real experience?

The bottom line?

The specialization of the profession has been recognized as well as the use of information science knowledge and skills across multiple disciplines. Some say, this is a specialist profession harboring many sorts of specialist (Salo, 2015). That does not have to be a bad thing, but it needs to be formally recognized so that the standards and process of obtaining an LIS degree can hold the market value needed to ensure long-term value, with a system of certifiable professional development opportunities.

Core standards certainly provide a focus for how librarians access and distill information for patrons and contribute to an informed community (Lux, 2013). The role of ALA standards and accreditation also is needed to produce accountability for practicing librarians to their communities of practice (O'Connor and Mulvaney, 2013). Added value to these standards will be to provide an ongoing assessment, recognizing trends and changes to user's needs. Perhaps it is time for consideration of a documented continuing education system that recognizes ongoing achievement of new knowledge and skills formally, to keep LIS degrees current and valuable. Current professionals owe it to themselves to take responsibility for their careers and should consider their options and desires strategically. Determining how they want their career path to advance, how much money they expect to make and how much job satisfaction they desire are not the responsibility of the LIS program that they came from. It should be a product of self-actualization of their knowledge, skills and abilities compared to what their ultimate career ambitions will be.

Understanding the employment market and how organizations must be strategizing their hiring needs can help individuals learn how to utilize resources and opportunities to supplement or enhance their degrees as needed or desired (Crumpton, 2015). Sometimes, you must lead to your own result. Organizations must satisfy the overall needs of their constituents and sometimes that means on an individual basis, skills will be considered outdated or not needed any longer, so something will have to change.

The value of your Library Science degree becomes what you make it. LIS programs need the feedback to make curriculum changes. Be involved in the program as alumni to influence these changes for the future of the profession. Individuals need to be aware of their organizations and anticipate change so as to seek professional development opportunities as needed to continue to achieve and obtain career satisfaction.

Look for a special issue of the Bottom Line in the near future that includes work and viewpoints from both educators and practitioners regarding the value and potential future of LIS.

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Further reading

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